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Frank Sublett fought a war abroad and racism at home, but as one of the first African-Americans to serve as a U.S. naval officer, he owes his early military leanings to boyhood fishing trips on Lake Michigan.

Traveling with his grandfather to Waukegan, Sublett admired the spiffy recruits as they marched in uniform at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center in North Chicago. He enlisted in the Navy during World War II mainly because of those memories, he said.

Sublett, 85, of Glencoe said he never dreamed that he would be honored as one of the "Golden Thirteen," the first African-Americans commissioned as Navy officers, or that the first memorial for black Navy veterans in the nation would pay special tribute to them.

On Monday, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) announced a \$97,000 federal grant that will go toward building the memorial within the next two years on land donated by North Chicago.

"Without Frank Sublett and the Golden Thirteen, there would be no Colin Powell," said Kirk, referring to the former U.S. secretary of state and chairman of the joint chiefs of staff.

Sublett and others set a precedent for African-Americans who went on to have outstanding military careers, Kirk said. Sublett served from 1942 to 1945, spending some time on the Marshall Islands in the Pacific, according to a 1987 Tribune article.

Later, he became the first black service manager for General Motors in Chicago and worked a stint as a model. He has outlived two of his four children, he said.

Sublett, a lifelong resident of Glencoe who attended New Trier High School in Winnetka, fought

back tears during Monday's show of support.

He and other members of the group World War II Black Navy Veterans are helping raise money for the memorial, which will cost an estimated \$150,000. They already have collected about \$30,000, in addition to the federal grant, according to Kirk's office.

The North Chicago Veterans Memorial Park will feature benches and a Walk of Honor made of bricks inscribed with the names of supporters.

"You can go through any branch of the Navy you want to, you can learn a trade, and it's free," said Sublett, who was trained as a machinist in the Navy and encourages young people to enlist, especially if they graduate from high school with good grades but cannot afford college.

At the time of Sublett's enlistment, the Navy had just opened up more jobs to blacks after decades of limiting their duties to the mess hall or engine rooms on ships, he said.

African-American recruits received initial training at Camp Robert Smalls, part of the training station at Great Lakes, according to the Naval Historical Center in Washington.

Sublett and another 15 African-American men passed the officer's exam with marks so high that incredulous Navy officials ordered them to retake it, Kirk said.

The group fared even better the second time around, he said.

Those who finally were commissioned as officers--the Golden Thirteen--still found they had to prove themselves before earning respect. White sailors were known to cross the street to avoid saluting the black officers, according to a 1994 Tribune article.

"I read about stuff like that, but it didn't bother me," said Sublett, who said he simply worked at getting his job done. "Some of my men and friends in the service had trouble. Who cares if they salute? They're saluting the uniform, not you, anyway."

Nathan Penn, 84, an enlisted man and member of World War II Black Navy Veterans, said it was hard to overlook the prejudice.

"There was a lot of denial to minorities. Due process, for one," said Penn, who also served in the Korean War distributing gasoline, food, weapons and other supplies.

Although the men have attempted to be role models for today's young recruits, at the time they didn't realize the precedent they were setting in the Navy, which remained largely segregated.

"I didn't think I'd ever be a pioneer to anything," said Penn, who went on to get a master's degree and teach at Chicago State University. "Good has come out of this."

North Chicago Mayor Leon Rockingham said the memorial will serve as more than a gesture of support toward the veterans, but as an inspiration to young people with dreams of achievement.

Sublett said he hopes to see the memorial when it's finished.

Only he and another veteran survive from the Golden Thirteen.

"If I live long enough," he said, "I'll come over and visit and say a prayer."